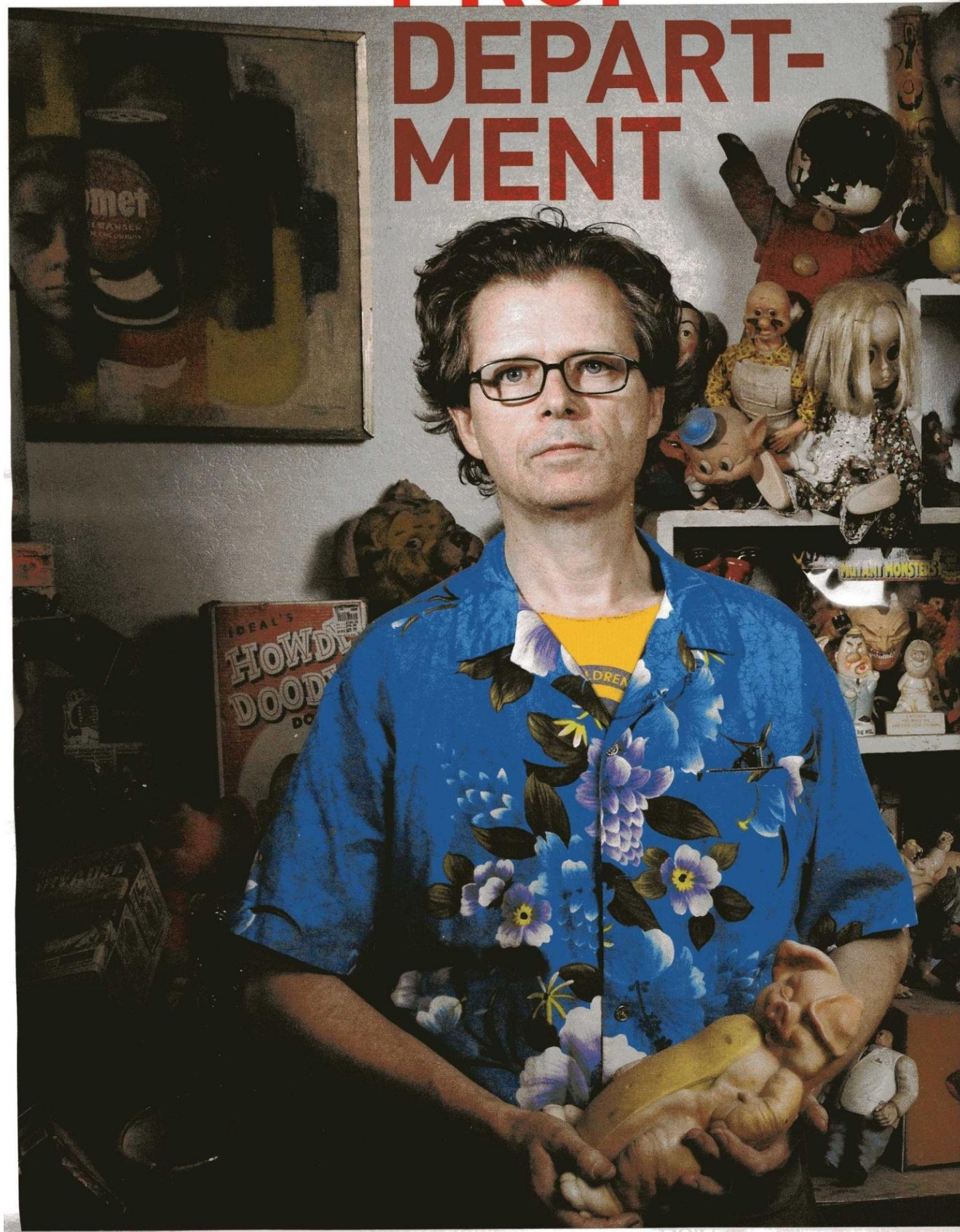


**ARTIST'S COLLECTION**

# PROP DEPART- MENT









## Jim Shaw tells Doug Harvey about the stuff of his night visions Photo by Martin Cox

Jim Shaw's artistic practice develops directly out of his pack-rat mentality. Most artists are collectors of some sort, but few have integrated the distinctive formal qualities and content of their collecting persona into their actual artwork as intricately and fruitfully as Shaw. One of the LA artist's first breakthrough works was a curatorial project: his 1990 exhibition "Thrift Store Paintings" drew largely from his own stash of unintentionally (or incorrectly) surrealist amateur canvases. Shaw's other major early enterprise was the multimedia opus *My Mirage* (1986–91), which—through an enormous faux-biographical constellation of discrete artworks—tells the story of all-American teen "Billy," whose bumpy coming-of-age begins with superhero comics and monster magazines, passes through psychedelia, and graduates to born-again Christianity. The subsequent "Dream Drawings" and "Dream Objects" (1991–) series demonstrates, through drawings and sculptures based on Shaw's dreams, how every cultural artifact that the artist has ever collected, coveted, or confronted has been filtered through the prop department of his insanely detailed unconscious night visions.

*My Mirage's* correspondence to Shaw's own adolescence in Midland, Michigan (aside from the born-again part), and the function of the work's encyclopedic range of pop-cultural references as a time capsule of '60s and '70s vernacular visual culture have been widely noted. Less commented on is the fulcrum between these two: *My Mirage* as a survey of Shaw's collections. From the vintage graphic design in children's encyclopedias, dorky pre-Marvel comic books, and movie-monster bubble-gum cards of Shaw's youthful hoardings to the trickle-down high-art of Roy Lichtenstein and Salvador Dalí that accompany Billy's artistic awakening, to the album covers, posters, and other mass-media ephemera of the psychedelic era, the sources for most of *My Mirage* can be found in the ever-expanding archive that occupies a large portion of Shaw's studio as well as various storage units.

Shaw's fascination with eccentric and esoteric philosophical movements—particularly those of an apocalyptic Christian bent—led to his accumulation of an extensive library of magazines, tracts, books, posters, videotapes of cable-access programs, and other fringe religious ephemera, which provided models and inspiration not just for Billy's salvation in the final "chapter" of the *My Mirage* narrative, but also for the artist's most recent major thematic umbrella: the invented religion of Oism. Supposedly founded by Annie O'Wooten in mid-19th-century upstate New York, Oism is an amalgam of quirky beliefs including reincarnation, the prohibition of figurative representation, the reverse passage of time, and a female divinity symbolized by the letter O.

Oism has resulted in a wealth of material from the Shaw studios, including the acclaimed 2003 *Donner Party* installation and his latest video, *The Whole (A Study in Oist Integrated Movement)* (2008), which owes as much to the cable-access broadcast aesthetics of the Unarius Academy of Science and the Universal World Church as it does to what Shaw describes as "the collection of Busby Berkeley musicals in my head." This conflation of the roles of artist and collector, and the merging of outward material manifestations and their underlying templates in the organizational structure of human consciousness, is what gives Shaw's work its perennial currency. Taken as a whole, his oeuvre is a shifting, all-accommodating mosaic pieced together from the inexhaustible supply of fascinating shards of our shattered culture.

He's probably going to need to rent another storage unit. ♦

A SOLO EXHIBITION OF JIM SHAW'S WORK WILL BE ON VIEW AT SIMON LEE GALLERY, LONDON, FROM FEB. 13 THROUGH MAR. 28.